



KWAKA, THE HEAD ENVOY, A BIG, FINE, BOLD-EYED HANSE, REQUESTED THAT THE MONEY MIGHT BE HANDED THEM THERE AND THEN.

imagined that he was uttering his next thought silently. "Keep the young beggar out of the way of Slade's girl, too. By Gad, I'd no idea Laura would grow up such a pretty child. If he'd been an ordinary clerk I wouldn't have minded, but the lad's a gentleman by birth, and now he's done the gallant rescue business as a start, he's just the sort of quixotic young ass to think he ought to go and marry the girl as a proper capping for the romance. And that, of course, would be the end of him socially."

"I say," Carter called out loudly, "Mr. Smith, do you know it's four o'clock in the morning, and there are some dangerous chills about just now? Don't you think you had better have a cigarette paper full of quinine by way of a night-cap, and then go to bed? It will be turning-out time in another hour or so."

"Matches, please. My pipe's out. Ah, thank you, Mr. Carter. Well, as I was saying, the King's awfully taken with that punkah you rigged for the mess-room, and the water wheel you set up in the river to run it, and when I showed him the native arrowheads, and the spears, and the execution axes you'd made to sell to the curiosity shops at home, he began to change his tune. By the time we'd got to the fifth bottle he'd given up asking for your head in a calash to take home with him, and before we'd finished the case he'd offered you the post of Chief Commissioner of Works in Okky City, with a salary in produce and quills of gold that'll work out of £1,000 a year."

"That's very flattering."

"Yes, isn't it, when you remember how he started. The only question is, will he keep his royal word when he's sober?"

"It's a nice point. Among other things I believe they're cannibals up in Okky City."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Assistant, you mustn't malign my friend, the King, too much. You need have no fears on that score. The Okky men have never been known to eat anybody with a red head. The only thing you'd have to funk would be sacrifice—with, of course, a most full and impressive ceremony. So I think you'll go, eh? All for the sake of K. O'Neill, whom you admire so much? And then the King won't stop the roads."

"No," said Carter shortly. "I have no intention of committing suicide at present. But if I'm an embarrassment at Malla-Nulla, you may fire me, or I'll resign if you wish it."

Swizzle-Stick Smith screwed his eye-glass into place and examined his assistant with thoughtful care. "Shouldn't dream of letting you go, my dear fellow. Always make a point of sticking by my officers. Just thought I'd let you know of the King's offer in case his Majesty refers to it to-morrow. There now, go to bed again, and don't dream the fighting's begun. You'll see plenty of service over this affair without dreaming over it on ahead."

When Carter set out for the West Coast of Africa from the Upper Wharfedale Vicarage, the one article in his kit which he thought suitable for the Coast was a small-bore nickel-plated revolver, which he had picked up second-hand in Skipton for ten and six. It had been smuggled in without his mother's knowledge, as there was no reason to add to her already great anxiety. His father had provided half a sovereign towards the cost, had advised him not to use the wretched thing except in case of necessity, but if need arose, to take heed that he held it straight.

Of course, on arrival he found, firstly, that the weapon was too small to be of effective use; secondly, that he could not hit a mark six feet square at more than a twelve-yard range; and, thirdly, that revolvers are not really articles of

fashionable wear for clerks in West Coast factories, whatever they may be in story-books. So the weapon lay in his mouldy portmanteau, and the moist Coast climate changed its nickel dress for a good coat of bright red rust.

But the morning after the King of Okky's arrival, while that bulky potentate was still asleep in the factory, Carter went in, cleaned the revolver as well as he could, and jammed cartridges into its reluctant chambers. He carried it pirate-fashion for the remainder of that day inside the band of his trousers, to his great personal discomfort, and to the vast enjoyment of Mr. Smith. However, the truculent Okky soldiers who had deliberately shaken weapons at him in the morning were reduced by the sight of it to a certain surly civility, and work in the fetich went on without any open rupture.

Mr. Smith was distinctly irritable when dawn came in with the morning tea, but presently, when the swizzle-stick began its merry swishing in the cocktail pitcher, he thawed into a pleasing geniality, which, by frequent application of the same remedy, endured throughout the day. Laura Slade had returned in her hammock by the beach road in the cool of the preceding night, and Carter's thoughts followed her to Smooth River factory, to the detriment of his work down in the fetich. He gave no mental attention whatever to the King of Okky, who sat cross-legged in a long chair in the factory veranda above him, but that bulky potentate kept returning with a dogged persistency to the subject of George Carter.

"Oh, Smith," he kept on saying, "I savvy champagne palaver, n' I savvy cocktail palaver, n' I fit for chop when chop-time lib. But I ask you for tell me, one-time, if you fit for dash me dem Red-head thut savvies machine-palaver. If you no fit, I stop dem road, an' no more trade lib for Malla-Nulla."

To which Mr. Smith, who knew his West Africa from a twenty-five years' study of its men and customs, would reply with an unruffled geniality that he was sure the King was far too good a heathen to try any such dirty game as putting ju-ju on the factory of an old friend. "You're pulling my leg, old Cockiwax," Mr. Smith would say. "I pray you cease, and you shall have the best cocktail this pagan Coast has seen or sniffed."

"Oh, Smith," the King would say, "I fit," and thereafter there would be truce till the houseboy brought the ingredients, and Mr. Smith, with his far-famed skill compounded them, and the pink cocktails went their appointed journey to perform their accustomed work. After which the African would once more repeat his unwearied demand.

From the rising of the King from his mat, to the hour of the midday meal, this demand and reply went on, and Swizzle-Stick Smith parried it with unruffled serenity. But an open rupture very nearly came at the meal time. As a king, the visitor was invited to sit at meat with the white men in their mess-room. He sat a little during the meal, but he appraised Carter's head so persistently with his eyes that that irritated young man, with the pride of race bubbling within him, would have openly resented the performance if he had not given a promise to Mr. Smith on this very point only a short half-hour before.

Such a state of things could not last long without bringing about an open breach, and Swizzle-Stick Smith, with his vast experience, saw this earlier than anybody, and made his arrangements accordingly.

He tried hard to write a letter, but his pen was not in the mood for intelligent calligraphy. So he had to fall back on

verbal instructions and a verbal message.

"Mr. Assistant," he said, when at last he put down his knife and fork, and the houseboy handed him his pipe and a match, "Mr. Assistant, I intended to make you a bearer of dispatches, but the gent's got into my confounded fingers this morning, and I doubt if even Slade could read my writing. So we'll just have to do the thing informally. We must have some more of that spot-white-on-blue cloth, and you must post off to the Smooth River factory and bring it back with you. It seems to be in heavy demand just now, though why, I can't imagine. I've been on the Coast twenty-five years now, and I can no more foretell the run of native fashions than I could the day I landed. But there it is, and though I'm sure Slade won't want to part, you must just make him. Say we'll pay him back in salt. He's sure to be short of salt. I never yet knew Slade to indent for half as many bags of salt as his trade required. You needn't hurry. If you're back here in three days' time that will be quite soon enough. You can take a hammock, of course."

"Thanks, very much, but I'd rather walk."

"Well, just as you please. You must commandeer what carriers you want from Slade."

So it came to pass that when the sun had dropped to a point whence it could throw a decent shadow, and the sea breeze mingled a bracing chill even into a temperature of eighty, Carter set off along the beach, with White-Man's Trouble balancing a milde-w-mottled Gladstone bag on his smartly-shaved cranium, in attendance. On one side of him Africa was fenced off by a wall of impenetrable greenery; on the other the Atlantic bumped and roared and creamed along the glaring sand. On the horizon the smoke of a Liverpool palm-oil tank called from him the usual Coaster's sigh.

"Oh, Carter," said his valet when they had left the factory buildings well out of earshot, "you plenty-much fine, and you no lib for steamah."

"It was about time I hidled up. When we get back to the factory I'll teach you how to pipe-clay shoes."

The Krooboy thought over this proposition for some minutes. Then said he: "I fit for tell you, Carter, dem last white man I pipe-clay shoes for, he lib for cemetery in two week. Savvy, Carter? Two week."

"All right, don't get so emphatic. I wasn't doubting you. But I'm going to risk the cemetery all the same. You may start by providing me with one pair of clean shoes a day, and when I get the taste of cleanliness again, maybe I'll run to two. Savvy?"

"Savvy plenty," grumbled White-Man's Trouble, and then presently: "You no fit for steamah palaver? You no lib for home?"

"No, I'm not going home yet awhile."

"But you plenty-much fine."

"Yes," admitted Carter. "I caught sight of myself in milde-wed pyjamas and a fortnight's beard, and was struck with the general fitness of my personal appearance. Savvy?"

"Savvy plenty. Oh, Carter, you lib for wife-palaver? Dem plenty-much fine clothes always one of the customs before wife-palaver."

The Krooboy pondered over this discovery during the next two miles of the march, and then said he: "Oh, Carter?"

"Well?"

"Dem Slade. You savvy seegar?"

"I suppose so. Why?"

"I see Smith dash dem Slade one box seegar an' he got what Slade said 'no fit' for before. Oh, Carter, you dash dem Slade one box seegar," said White-Man's Trouble, and he treated his employer to a knowing wink.

"Whatever for?"

"Because then, after he got dem seegar, he sell you Laura for half dem price he ask before."

"You're an impertinent savage," said Carter half tickled, half annoyed.

But White-Man's Trouble stopped, put down the yellow Gladstone bag on the baking sand, and pointed to the blue parallel tribal tattoo marks between his brows. "I Krooboy, sar. I no bushboy, sar! I lib for eductia as deckboy an' stan-by-at-crane boy on steamah, sar. I no fit for stay with you, sar, if you call me impertinent savage."

Carter stared. "Good heavens, man! I didn't intend to hurt your feelings."

White-Man's Trouble waved the beach-od inside of his paw towards his master.

"Oh, Carter, you apologize. Palaver set."

He bowed a head which was quaintly shaved into garden patches, replaced the Gladstone bag on its central bed of wool, and once more strode cheerfully ahead.

Carter followed moodily. How had they all guessed at his admiration for Laura? He had thought it the most intimate of secrets, a delicate confidence that he had no more than dared breathe even to his own inner consciousness. But first old Smith had blurted it out, and now even his servant talked about it openly. He had no doubt whatever that the whole thing had been fully discussed over the cooking fires of the native compound at Malla-Nulla the night before.

Then somehow his eyes swung round to the dancing horizon, and the Liverpool steamer's smoke, boring up towards the north, easily ferried his thoughts across the gap which lay between that baking African beach, and the cool village tucked snugly in beneath the Upper Wharfedale moors. He tried to concentrate his mind on the roses in the vicarage garden, and cared little about the size. The Vicar admired big blooms and snipped off superfluous buds when his wife was out of the way, and during summer a gentle

wrangle over the roses was quite one of the features of their quiet life.

But the roses refused to stay in the centre of the picture. Laura insisted on taking their place. Suppose he took Laura back to Wharfedale—as Mrs. George Carter, his mother, blessed woman, might be sorry, but she would accept her. He was sure of that. But his father? Almost the last piece of advice the Vicar had given on parting was:

"Now, lad, remember always you're a white man, and don't get mixed up with any woman who owns a single drop of blood darker than your own. If you do, you can never come back here, and you'll hate yourself all the rest of your life. Remember I hold an Indian chaplaincy before I got this living, and I know what I'm talking about."

Carter shook a sudden fist at the steamer's smoke for supplying him with such a distasteful train of thought, and turned for light conversation to White-Man's Trouble. That garrulous person was quite ready to humor him in the matter.

The sea breeze died away a little afterwards, and they marched in breathless heat till the cool land breeze took its place, and brought them spicy odors of the hot trees. And always on one side of them the surf roared, and crashed, and creamed along the benches.

The sun drooped to the horizon and hurried beneath it in visible inches of fall. Daylight went out. The colors were blotted from the sky, and the stars lit up, one racing another to the first. The noises from the forest changed in correspondence. From close at hand a leopard roared a greeting to the darkness.

Night was fully dressed ten minutes after the sun had vanished. It was after nine o'clock, and in the chill of a wet gray mist, that they reached O'Neill and Craven's factory on the banks of Smooth River.

Now nine o'clock in the lonely factories of the Coast is usually bedtime, and Carter was a good deal surprised to hear the hum of a great activity pulsing out into the night; and presently, when they came within eye-range, to see the buildings aglow with lights. But there was a further surprise packed and ready for him. As they came close, a black man leaped over the end of an upraised wall of palm-oil puncheons, and deliberately pointed a gun squarely at Carter's chest.

A good deal of discussion took place afterward as to what would have been the proper procedure under the circumstances, but that may conveniently be omitted from this record, which deals only with immediate history; and the fact is that Carter rushed the sentry, clipped him under the ear, skinned his own knuckles, and captured the gun. White-Man's Trouble in the meanwhile had with much presence of mind thrown himself on his face to avoid any discharge of por-leg from the concealed marksmen, and was bawling lustily for "Slade, oh Slade," to "Stop dem dam gun-palaver." Which noisy request presently had its wished-for result.

Slade himself came out to meet them, and even then his reception was sufficiently startling. "Good God!" he rapped out, "then you've escaped, too, Carter, as well as the Krooboy. What lars these niggers are! I imagined that your—that parts of you were up at Okky City by now. I supposed they've scuppered poor old Swizzle-Stick Smith all right, though! Did he have a bad time of it? Why?" he said as he came nearer, and saw his caller's spruce get-up, "you don't look as if you'd been scrapping much. Or bolting very hard, either," he added as an afterthought.

"Unless," said Carter, "you're referring to an invasion by the Turks, or the French, or the Men in the Moon, I haven't a notion what you're talking about."

"Haven't you come from Malla-Nulla?"

"Left there about a quarter to four."

"And hasn't it been sacked?"

"It was sitting down by the beach, looking just as white hot as usual, and no more, when I left."

"What about the King of Okky, then?"

"He was there at Malla-Nulla, filling a very big chair on the veranda."

"And there has been no raid? I don't understand."

"The King of Okky," said Carter patiently, "has raided our factory to the extent of one case of fizz, of which Mr. Smith says he drank half, but barring that, and about six gallons of other mixed drinks, I didn't see him get much out of us. He certainly was threatening to stop the roads when I left, but I think that was all gas. He only wanted to stick Mr. Smith for more drinks."

"He's stopped the roads right enough."

"Not he," said Carter cheerfully.

The older man thought a minute and then, "Come along with me," he said. "I guess ocular demonstration is about the only thing that will convince you that there's mischief in the air, and that that crafty old devil of a king is at the bottom of it." He led to a factory out-building, threw open a door, and scraped a match. "Look in there."

Carter did so, and promptly felt sick, and came out. But he got another light and returned resolutely to the inspection. "Two, four, seven. Ah! all killed the same way. I say that's pretty ghastly."

"Isn't it? They were all fine healthy Krooboy when they marched out of here this morning, carrying up some salt bags to our subfactory on the Okky road. There were some bits of feathers and a rag or two strung up alongside the path, and they didn't notice them, or didn't tumble to it that they were ju-ju. Consequently they are now what you see. This is the King of Okky's way of hinting that the road is stopped. That pot-leg must have been fired at not more than a two-yard range. Some of the poor devils are regularly blown inside